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ABSTRACT

An educator in a bilingual family literacy program offers 10 suggestions for enhancing the retention of limited-English-proficient (LEP) adult students, accompanied by anecdotes of personal classroom experiences. Guidelines include: (1) being responsive to student expectations about teaching method and acknowledging cultural differences; (2) acknowledging that student goals may differ from stated program goals; (3) promoting a sense of community and friendship among students and volunteers; (4) reminding each student that he brings his own set of skills and is competing only against himself; (5) helping students reduce frustration; (6) creating alternative arenas for student success, even in areas unrelated to studies; (7) mixing teaching methods and classroom formats, offering explicit reasons; (8) allowing students a chance to get to know their instructor and feel comfortable in the class environment; (9) emphasizing, gently, the variety of reasons for literacy learning; and (10) caring and letting it show. (MSE)
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Ten Complementary Principles To Retain LEP Adults in a Bilingual Family Literacy Program

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TEN COMPLEMENTARY PRINCIPLES

TO RETAIN LEP ADULTS IN A BILINGUAL FAMILY LITERACY PROGRAM*

As a teacher, in any particular classroom, the primary goal is to find what specific methods and practices will work there, at a given time, with the present students. As an education researcher, the goal is to generalize away from events of a specific time and place (except for telling anecdotes) and to identify larger trends and truths that have widespread, or perhaps universal, relevance. The following list of principles is my attempt to share general recommendations to teachers of LEP and/or limited-literate adults, based on my specific practice running a bilingual family literacy program. My aim is to provide useful suggestions and encouragement to aid teachers in their practice. Before reciting the list, however, it makes sense to describe briefly the context from which these principles were derived.

Until recently, I worked as the coordinator and lead instructor of an experimental, bilingual, family literacy program, called Family Reading, which met at a public library in Kansas City, Kansas (KCK). KCK is a low-income, multi-ethnic, industrial neighbor of Kansas City, Missouri. Each of the roughly 100 students that I taught were Spanish-speaking immigrants, more than 90% of them originally from Mexico. All came voluntarily to my class (as opposed to by mandate from the welfare department, the court, etc.). All had the right and power to leave the program, at their own initiative, if and when their life circumstances changed or if they decided the class was not responding to their self-described interests and needs.

The KCK program was a test-site for the National Council of La Raza's (NCLR's) experimental Family Reading curriculum. Family Reading was one of six components of NCLR's Project EXCEL (Excellence in Community Educational Leadership). All the EXCEL models were intended to demonstrate methods for improving Latino educational success across the United States by discouraging dropping-out, encouraging adult literacy and intergenerational learning, and rewarding academic success.

The Family Reading curriculum required the use of the Language Experience Approach (LEA),** the completion of entrance and exit examinations, a bilingual format, and the frequent promotion of home literacy activity with one's children. Beyond that, there were few program guidelines, which left the instructor with a lot of flexibility and discretion. Nonetheless, these requirements did sometimes put parameters on how the class could be led and how student requests could be responded to. Required entrance and exit exams were a particular stumbling block. (They were intimidating.) Thus, on some occasions a balance needed to be found between students' goals and tolerance levels and NCLR's wish to know how well their model worked.

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* This paper was first presented in outline form at the National Center for Family Literacy's Annual Convention in Louisville, KY on April 18, 1993.

** LEA is based on the pedagogical theories of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and others; it claims that students will learn language best when they are studying topics of direct relevance to their lives (e.g. their own autobiographies), regardless of the complexity of the topic. Put another way, LEA believes that people want and need the oral and literary skills to speak and write about who they are, what they want, and what they believe, so that is what should be emphasized in an LEA-oriented classroom.

Unlike some other family literacy programs, there was no classroom based inter-generational learning that was explicitly part of the Family Reading model. To be sure, a primary goal was to help parents and other care-providers recognize the opportunity and responsibility that each had to teach and guide their children, but that activity was written about, talked about, and critiqued in class, not practiced. For that reason, the Family Reading model sometimes looked as much like an adult literacy classroom as it did a family literacy classroom. (Kids played and learned with trained instructors one room away.)

It is from this experiential background that I created the ten complementary principles to retain LEP adults in a bilingual family literacy program. I do not presume the list to be complete or flawless. Nor are the principles articulated here meant to be prescriptive. They are generalized descriptions of the philosophical orientation that worked for me. It should be noted, however, that, in the year since I left, all the volunteer assistants have left the KCK program and enrollment has declined about 80%. Those changes suggest to me that the philosophy outlined below has merit. I do not know my successor's ways and practices, but I do know that what my students, the volunteers, and myself practiced worked.

I hope that the principles described here provoke other literacy educators to critically reflect, in some cases reinforcing the appropriateness of certain practices they are engaged in and in other cases leading to program expansion or adjustment. Excepting the final principle, which I hope lingers with the reader, there is no particular order to this list. Teaching adults, teaching a new language, teaching literacy, teaching across cultural boundaries, none of that is easy. Now that I have temporarily bowed out of the classroom to pursue my Ph.D., I particularly salute those who are still trying. It is to you and your students that this list is dedicated and directed. Here then is the list:

1.) Be responsive to student expectations vis a vis teaching method(s) and curriculum. Schooling may have been very different in their country of origin. Students will continue to come if the class is what they expected or better.

All my students were from Latin America, mostly Mexico. Though the amount of previous schooling experience that each had had varied considerably (from zero years to university experience), nearly all shared similar expectations about what a formal learning environment should look like. They expected and asked for dictations, for phonetics practice, and for grammatical reviews (none of which fit very easily with an LEA approach). They expected me to be at the front of the classroom, at the chalkboard. And they called me *maestro* (teacher) or *profesor* (professor), instead of using either my first or last name, even though I was thirty years younger than a few of them. (I was 22 when I took over the program; twenty-four when I left.)

For limited periods of time, the students accepted my departures from their expectations, be it for biographical writing exercises, bilingual reading activities or small group tutorials, but they did so only semi-comfortably and only if I had explained the relevance or connectedness of the activity to one of the things they expected to do. (It is also true that students' expectations were not static; as long time students became accustomed to some of our particular practices, they began to enjoy them more and to learn from them faster.)

I was several times told by a students who had just made (in my mind) astounding gains, 'That was fun, but when will we do real learning?' If I did not respond to that question by justifying the present activity or by switching to a new topic and/or pedagogical method that was more to their style, the questioning student would sometimes leave the program altogether. (And it is hard to teach someone who is not there.) I learned that the hard way.

2.) Know that students may be coming to the class for reasons very different than the stated goals of the program (i.e. family literacy may be an acceptable idea to them but not their reason for attending). Their agendas typically can coexist with yours. Pay heed to their agendas too.

Most of my students said they had come to the class to learn to speak English or to speak better English. They were amenable to the idea of learning to read and write English too and mostly amenable to the idea of spending homework time with their children involved in educational activity, but most were thrown by my insistence that the class be bilingual (i.e. that it include Spanish). They were skeptical for at least two reasons, few accepted the educational research findings which show that it is much easier to become fluent and literate in a second language if one first becomes literate in one's native tongue. Studying one language to learn another seemed counter-intuitive, and the world of educational researchers and their recommendations seemed too remote and intangible to have any personal relevance. Secondly, even for those who accepted the research evidence as plausible, few wanted to admit that their Spanish literacy skills were limited, that they needed any improvement before the leap to English.

If we were going to study Spanish, if we were going to focus on home literacy activities, those activities needed to be explicitly related to their learning of English, or have some other acceptable rationale. I taught Spanish literacy skills under the cover of the fact that 'reviewing' Spanish helped explain a point in English (e.g. the use of the auxiliary verb *haber* in Spanish is similar to the use of 'do' as an auxiliary in English), that creating versions of text in both languages meant they could review it at home, or that the Spanish was necessary practice for our high school student volunteers who were trying to learn or improve their Spanish. I did not refrain from sharing the findings of education researchers, but I did find that the alternative explanations from this paragraph were more acceptable to the students.

Other ideas and practices were received dubiously, but without the resistance that the Spanish lessons drew. It was easiest to present the idea of home literacy activity (e.g. making grocery lists with children, reviewing their homework, reading them a book) as something that could coexist with a student's goal of learning English. Most students would agree to lead home literacy activity (e.g. reading a book with their child) because they liked the idea that they were helping their child. They insisted, however, that discussion of such activity be either limited to a small portion of class time or be incorporated into some activity which also included English language instruction. We bargained back and forth; if they would do more home literacy promotion, I would teach more English.

Regularly in class, I echoed my students, agreeing that the class's goal was to teach English. In practice, however, there was more than just the explicit teaching of English that was going on.

3.) Promote a sense of community between students, between volunteers, between students and volunteers, and any other

combinations you can think of. Your family literacy class may be a primary means for an immigrant student to create a network of friends and support in their new neighborhood. Friends encourage each other to come to class.

Though limited English proficiency (LEP status) and Spanish oral fluency were common denominators amongst my students, their lack of English oral skills and English literacy skills was typically not their only unmet life need. Indeed, if I did not pay attention to my participants' other life circumstances, many would drop out for reasons that had nothing to do with any of the specific activities of the class, while the attendance and ability to function of others would also be compromised. Put simply, being an immigrant in America is hard. English is one obstacle to getting ahead, but students also needed a chance to forge new friendships, to learn about community resources, and to feel part of a community.

Promoting relationships between program participants and between staff and participants was a form of enlightened self-interest. For instance, If a student came to class to see a friend, she was still coming to class. If students met with each other away from class, it was probable that they would talk about class, perhaps even study together, because participation in the class was a point they had in common. Even if friendships occasionally had no direct classroom significance, the sunnier disposition of a student who did not feel as lonely would dispose that student to learn better.

4.) Remind each student that s/he is competing only against her/himself. Each student brings a different personal history to class and a different range of skills. That individual skill level should be the threshold which they use to measure their progress.

This is perhaps the hardest idea to sell, but it is crucial. While students may see both superficial and significant similarities between themselves and their fellow students, (e.g. age, parenting experience, country of origin), if their educational experiences (or lack thereof) are significantly different, they cannot begin to compete on the same footing.

A student with a degree in engineering earned at a Mexican university, should have more classroom skills and thus more classroom success, than a student who has attended two years of primary school in her entire life. The student on the short end of the stick needs to remember that. Similarly, if two superficially similar students have different histories trying to learn English, i.e., one has taken other classes and one has not, than those students should expect different rates of language skill improvement as well.

This is to say nothing of variations that exist naturally because of varied levels of exhaustion caused by raising kids, keeping house, and/or going to work. Sometimes even the message that students are differently talented for innate reasons is a palatable message for a frustrated student (though that is one I would use most cautiously).

What is important is to make the class non-competitive, to heed but not dwell on skill differences, and to promote each individual's self-esteem. It makes sense when you recognize that a student has developed a new skill, or expanded one, to remind that student of his point of origin. "You didn't used to know that; now you do; congratulations!" A student who know five words in English should not be trying to

keep up with her neighbor, but rather trying to learn words number six, seven, and eight. Sometimes she needs to be reminded of that.

5.) Don't let students get bogged down with frustration because they have not immediately realized long term goals. Help them recognize and be proud of their incremental gains.

If a student arrives at class with little experience studying or practicing English, that student is not going to have the whole language mastered after a month or two, though that may be their wish. The instructor needs to help the student recognize that language learning will be a long haul with no end, you can always learn more, but, more importantly the instructor needs to emphasize the functional aspects of what a student has already learned. "See what you've learned!"

I had about a half dozen students who regularly told me that they were stupid and could learn nothing. (Intriguingly, all were women; I guess men who think they cannot learn do not even show up at all.) I had to tell them they were wrong, but I had to do so in an extremely sensitive fashion. The last thing a person with such low self-confidence needs is to be told they are wrong. Instead I would try to show them. 'Where do you live?' I would ask. They would tell me the address and I would ask them how they learned that. 'How do you get to work?' I would ask. As I heard complex explanations of bus schedules and transfers en route, I would ask how did they learn that. If they had children, I would sometimes ask them their kids' names. When they responded I would ask again how did they know that. The important next step was to come up with an example of something they had learned in class. Almost anything would suffice.

In one case, I told a particularly insistent mother that maybe she did not need to learn to read; all she had to do was fake it, so her children could see her 'enjoy' books such that they would be tempted to pick one up themselves. At our final graduation, she wrote (in Spanish) a heartfelt thank you to me for being so patient with her. When she had started, she did not have the nerve to write anything more than an incomplete alphabet.

Sometimes people who claimed they could not learn just dropped out, but, in two cases, students who had made such a claim, left, were gone for a while, then came back. Maybe they finally believed me. Maybe their life circumstances had changed. Maybe a friend or sibling had talked them into coming back. Importantly, they were back, at that point it was my turn to just be welcoming. (See Principle #8)

6.) Create alternate arenas for students to feel successful (perhaps in areas that have nothing to do with their studies).

Twice in my two years as coordinator we put on fundraising meals at a nearby community cafe. Both of these events contributed significantly to the programs success and did so for a number of reasons. (Raising money was not primary among them; after food costs and the distribution of free tickets to family members of program participants, each dinner netted about $300.) The dinners gave the students a format in which to give back to the program which was giving to them. In other words, it was a means for them to show their thanks. The dinners were also a change of pace, an economics lesson, and chance to collaborate with each other for extended periods (i.e. a group project). The solidarity produced and demonstrated by production of the meals was obvious and welcome. Most importantly, however, in the kitchen and as a server, different skills were needed than those required in the

classroom. Students who were shy, frustrated, or confused during classes, suddenly were acting as leaders, offering instructions and keeping the group on task. I remember one of my less confident students handing me a cheese grater and showing me how to grate cheese. (I knew how to grate cheese.) Watching her take charge was exhilarating. Happily, she brought her dinner success back with her into the classroom. She was a different, more confident student.

The presence of high school volunteers who were native English speakers presented more opportunities for students to demonstrate their skills. In this case, the volunteers were trying to learn Spanish (at the same time they were teaching English), so the students, LEP adults, suddenly became Spanish teachers. The students could feel proud of the Spanish-language success of their volunteer charges. Acting as Spanish teachers was also a means for students to share their own wisdom and heritage, which also connected positively back to improved self-esteem.

Students who found their skills rewarded kept coming to class. Students who felt needed in class and for class activities (e.g. the dinners) liked the responsibility and kept coming. Students who felt frustrated by some aspect or another of class would ignore or overcome some of that frustration if they felt rewarded and successful in other ways. All of this contributed back to their retention and their learning success.

7.) Mix teaching methods and classroom formats, and be explicit as to why. Everyone learns differently so different types of lessons will appeal to and help different students.

This is mostly self-explanatory. Consistent with Principle #6, giving students a variety of ways to demonstrate their competence increases the likelihood that in at least one case they will. As a teacher, I tried to reach all of my learners; mixing approaches helped ensure that through one activity or another I did. Also, this strategy helped avoid the development of fissures between students of various skill levels because, depending on the activity, students' skill levels overlapped, being superior for one activity and inferior for the next. For example, the person who was best at recording dictations may not have been the most creative and/or poignant story writer.

Of course, students needed to work on the areas they were weak in as well as what they were good at. Mixing formats promoted this multiple skill development. Energy from learning successes could be expended to tackle more difficult exercises.

On both of these points, I was candid with my students. "Some of you will enjoy this more than others." "Some of you will understand this more easily than others. Share your strategies; help each other out."

8.) Let students size you up and don't close doors to them. A student may come twice, then stay away from the program for a while, and then finally decide that their life circumstances are such that they can commit to coming to class regularly.

This could be aggravating. I would plan for five people to be at class and fifteen would show up, three who I had not seen for months, four who were new, three who came intermittently, and the five I had expected. What to do? I always tried to remember to be patient, accepting and gracious. None of my students lived lives that

were easy. I needed to focus on what opportunities were created by their presence, rather than worry myself or castigate them about why they had been gone.

One nice thing about having volunteers was that I could split up the class at a moment's notice, giving various volunteers and students different tasks and then dedicate my time to welcoming the newcomers. I always kept some tried and true introductory exercises with me, which I could take out whenever they were needed.

In the absence of volunteers, which was sometimes the case for morning classes, I could wing it a different way: Having older students learn by acting as teachers and orientation assistants to newcomers and those who had not been there for awhile. I was explicit about why I was doing this. It was unorthodox, but viable, as long as my students, new and old, were not confused and/or frustrated by what was going on.

As an instructor, I was in a position to set the tone. New adult literacy students, LEP or not, have often had previous uncomfortable learning experiences. Classes are an activity they may be quite suspicious of. If they did not like what they found, they would leave and sometimes never come back. That was not the outcome I or they were seeking or needing. So I grinned, enjoyed their presence, and struggled to make the classroom welcoming.

I remembered too, that returning students may have had many good reasons for having been away (including illness of themselves or their children, travel for work, for family responsibilities, or vacation, or simply because psychologically they were not ready to deal with my class the first time they came and later they thought they were). Those reasons were sometimes personal. I thought that it was polite to ask why they had been away (often they blurted it out even before I could ask). When their answer was forthcoming I had a writing exercise in the making (i.e. 'Where were you since you last came to class?'). If they were more uncomfortable, that was their prerogative, I moved on.

9.) Gently, but overtly, remind students that it is not just their individual learning at stake. All the good reasons for family literacy program (Being a role model, gaining new skills to assist your child's learning, etc.) can be motives for a student to stay involved in a program, even if it was not his/her original reason for coming.

Principles #1 and #2 were reminders to pay attention to where students are coming from, geographically and psychologically. That advice needs to be supplemented by the reminder that students are changing (hopefully learning) as they keep coming to class. I needed to respond to 'where they were' as well as 'where they had been'. Happily, 'where they were' was often at least a partial reflection of what I had been teaching. My students and I were getting into closer sync all the time. Ideas that were novel to them when I first suggested them to them may have become sacrosanct in a matter of weeks (e.g. read to your child everyday).

Family literacy, even in the modified fashion that I practiced it, was more than regular bilingual adult literacy. Built into to it was the notion that students are also teachers and promoters of learning (Isn't that a big chunk of what parenting is?). Family literacy may not be the reason my students came to our program, but, for a few, it was the reason they stayed. Moreover, through family literacy, I and my volunteers and my students explicitly touched and hopefully improved lives of people

who were not directly in the program (e.g their children and spouses). Such indirect impact may be a spin-off of all literacy efforts; here it was so intentionally.

10.) Care and let it show.

It does not matter what you are teaching, sincerity, if you have it, always shines through and makes students feel welcome and motivated. Their success and their well-being (and their children's well-being) was important to me. They could read that on my face or, perhaps, see it in my heart. I think it showed that I respected them and that they, as individuals, deserved such care and respect.